

Brief

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Mindfulness: why is it on the agenda for leaders at Unilever, Google and the House of Commons? And what is it?

Mindfulness is everywhere – what was once the habit of Buddhists in mountain retreats is now being practiced in companies like Unilever, Proctor and Gamble and GM, by CEOs in over 40 breakouts at Davos, in the UK Houses of Parliament, and even on the trading floor in investment banks.

Chade-Meng Tan, head of mindfulness at Google, drives an initiative to teach emotional intelligence through meditation, and their most popular class of the dozen that are offered has a waiting list of over 6 months. Goldman Sachs has moved up 48 places in the Fortune best place to work list, reportedly due in large part to its mindfulness classes and practices. Sally Boyle, their head of human capital management for EMEA has said: “In years to come we’ll be talking about mindfulness as we talk about exercise now.”

But is this just the latest fad – reflected and driven by a stream of articles in the FT the latest panacea for a more unpredictable and higher risk world – or does mindfulness really bring something new to how we improve our working life and performance?

Where did Mindfulness come from?

The concept of mindfulness - of being aware in the present moment – with a thoughtful and conscious acceptance of feelings and emotional states, has been around for centuries. It was brought into secular practice predominantly through the work of Jon Kabat-Zinn at the University of Massachusetts in the late 1970’s. It has since become common place in clinical psychology and therapy, particularly in helping stress-induced disorders such as depression and anxiety.

However, there is has been a big rise in mainstream business interest in the practice, most visibly since the banking-led crash and all the learning of lessons that has flowed from that. The accelerating changes and complexities in the world mean we now work under the increasing pressure of hyper-connectivity and rising expectations of openness, increasing unpredictability and risk - and declining levels of consumer and employee trust.

This has led some leaders to reassess how they can stop and reconnect with themselves and others in more authentic and richer ways. The shift to a ‘connection economy’ provides new challenges that need leaders to be much more aware of themselves and others. Mindfulness is being explored as a way to cultivate these skills against this highly pressurised environment.

What the benefits appear to be

Academic research, neuroscience and case studies in mindfulness suggest a range of benefits can come from regular practice in mindfulness. These include:

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- increased resilience
- greater clarity of thought
- increased concentration and attention span
- improved decision making
- reduced stress
- increased wellbeing.

These benefits are thought to come from the way mindfulness helps us manage two core psychological processes:

1. Firstly mindfulness helps people decouple themselves from events, experiences, thoughts and emotions. This then decreases the degree to which these can automatically effect our thoughts and feelings.
2. This in turn enhances a number of other psychological processes such as emotional regulation, working memory, while increasing persistence and decreasing rumination.

The core attributes of mindfulness – and at the heart of the way it is trained

While we all have a general level of ‘mindfulness’ - some of us are more mindful than others. Mindfulness can be trained. This is predominately done through use of meditation techniques, which can range from a full eight-week meditation course, through to simple 5 minute breathing exercises to be done regularly at work.

At its core, mindfulness has seven key attributes, all which can be cultivated in, and have a direct impact on, day-to-day working life:

- 1) Fully sense situations vs continual analysis:** The human brain has a huge capacity for continually analysing, planning and comparing. However we often get carried away with this, and fail to take account of information we might be receiving from our other senses such as intuition and body language.

Mindful leaders use all their senses and information available to make the best, balanced decisions available – from all sources.

- 2) Making conscious choices vs operating on autopilot:** We are programmed to respond unconsciously based on previous experiences and knowledge (see our Brief on *Decision-making: how to avoid your leadership team acting like teenagers*). This is a great tool that has helped our species survive and evolve, but came about in a less complex world.

Mindful leaders turn off the autopilot regularly before making decisions and acting, to look at new information and the situation as it really is, rather than just sticking to habit and comfort zones.

- 3) Accepting things as they are vs striving for preconceived ideas:** Mental and emotional time is often wasted on thinking how things “should be” – when this is at its worst, it can become a toxic version of tunnel vision where only perfection will do. This is both an issue of having too fixed preconceived ideas (a clear direction is important for success in business or tasks, but there needs to be space for flexibility and creativity), and also lack of acceptance of what is actually the outcome.

Mindful leaders are able to accept things for what they are, and allows them to deal with problems or unexpected situations in the most effective and appropriate ways possible.

- 4) Seeing thoughts as mental events only vs solid and real:** We all get caught in the trap of having negative thoughts (eg “this is impossible, I cannot do this”,) which in turn breeds negative feelings (eg frustration, tiredness), and more negative thoughts (eg “I feel so tired, even if this were possible I do not have the energy”). Increasing psychological flexibility - the ability to recognize and stop ruminative patterns of thought and focus on the positives - helps leaders remain motivated and focused.

A mindful leader is able to see their thoughts as merely mental events when they happen, and stop the subsequent spiral of negative feelings by reframing them positively.

- 5) Approaching vs avoiding uncomfortable things:** Putting off tackling a direct report whose performance is slipping, or a team meeting to discuss a project that is going awry, can be like avoiding a trip to a dentist. Leaders have very busy lives and it is quite easy to put some things off to next week. Suppressed or avoided situations often take on a life of their own, becoming overinflated by fears or worries that are actually more positive possible outcomes than prolonged agonising make them out to be.

Mindful leaders are able to approach challenging and uncomfortable situations and personal thoughts and feelings straight up, rather than putting them off and so letting them subconsciously influence the rest of their day.

- 6) Remaining in the present moment vs reliving the past or worrying about the future:** As leaders, we know reflective learning is important – a post mortem or lessons learnt session teaches us a lot about our business. Conversely, it is incredibly important to look forward – a good medium and long term strategy is vital to business success.

However mindfulness teaches us that forward thinking and backward rumination are only useful when applied to the here and now. As a business, more time needs to be attended to what is going on today – especially as we live in such fast-moving and complex times.

Mindful leaders benefit from spending less time ruminating about how something has been done in the past, or worrying about the future – but mainly focus on now.

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- 7) **Making time for nourishing activities vs depleting ones:** Work-life balance has been on the agenda for years; however, mindfulness highlights the importance of identifying the tasks and activities that give us and our colleagues energy. This can be in, and out of work, and can be small or large.

A mindful leader makes time for these tasks and activities, and prioritises them along with the “big decisions” to improve not just work/life balance but also the quality of work.

Research suggests that even 15 minutes a day building new ‘mindful’ habits in the office can make a difference – especially alongside a bit more exercise and a better diet. Measurable results include better decision-making, improved collaboration and simply enjoying work more.

Sources

Sources used for this Brief include: Bush: *Working with Mindfulness* (Google, Seva, Center for Contemplative Mind in Society); Bush: *Google's Search Inside Yourself Adviser Mirabai Bush on Working with Mindfulness* (YouTube); Chambers, Gullone, Allen: *Mindful emotion regulation and integrative review* (Clinical psychology review); George: *Developing mindful leadership for the C-suite* (Harvard Business Review); Glomb, Duffy, Bono, Yang: *Mindfulness at work*, (Research in Personnel and Human Resources Management); Hockman: *Mindfulness, getting its share of attention* (NY times); VanderMey *Yes, Goldman Sachs really is a great place to work* (Fortune); Chade-Meng Tan: *Search inside yourself* (Google); Williams & Penman: *Mindfulness, finding peace in a frantic world* (Oxford); Chade-Meng Tan: *Chade-Meng Tan "Search Inside Yourself", Authors at Google* (YouTube).